

Research Brief



A Report on the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement

Introduction

Kentucky's eight public universities participated in the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as part of a consortium organized by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. NSSE, a national survey administered by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning, examines the extent to which colleges use their resources to promote effective teaching and learning. It measures student activities and behaviors that studies have shown to be important to student learning, such as time spent preparing for class and frequency of contact between faculty and students outside of class. More than 185,000 students at 649 four-year institutions nationwide participated in the survey between 2001 and 2003. In 2003, 1,900 first-year and senior students at Kentucky's public universities responded to the survey via mail or Internet. The Kentucky consortium also took part in the survey in 2001.

The Council uses results from NSSE to gauge progress on two performance measures in Kentucky's accountability program – the Key Indicators of Progress toward Postsecondary Reform. These indicators are organized around five questions:

1. Are more Kentuckians ready for postsecondary education?
2. Are more students enrolling?
3. Are more students advancing through the system?
4. Are we preparing Kentuckians for life and work?
5. Are Kentucky's communities and economy benefiting?

NSSE's benchmarks of effective educational practice are used to gauge progress in undergraduate experience, an indicator under question 4. Selected NSSE questions are used to measure undergraduate civic engagement, also under question 4. Results from the 2003 survey show Kentucky's public universities have made progress since 2001 in undergraduate student experience; survey results suggest more Kentucky students are participating in activities that foster student learning. More progress is needed in undergraduate civic engagement.

Compared to 2001, fewer 2003 survey respondents indicated they participated in volunteer and civic activities.

NSSE's Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

Responses to 41 questions from the NSSE survey – “The College Student Report” – are assigned to five clusters of similar activities to make up NSSE's national benchmarks of effective educational practice. Scores for each benchmark are created on a 100-point scale and weighted to ensure they are representative of an institution's student population. Separate scores are reported for first-year and senior students. The benchmarks are:

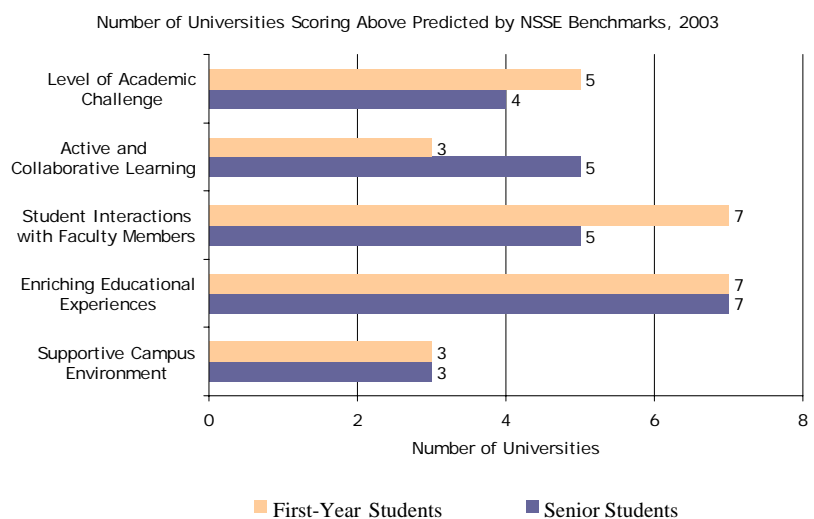
- Level of academic challenge
- Active and collaborative learning
- Student interactions with faculty members
- Enriching educational experiences
- Supportive campus environment

For each benchmark, NSSE provides institutions with actual and predicted scores (see attachment 1 for institution-specific scores for the Kentucky consortium). Predicted scores are based on student demographics, admissions selectivity, enrollment, and a variety of other factors and allow institutions to compare their performance with the performance of similar institutions. An institution whose actual score is higher than their predicted score in a given benchmark category outperforms their peers in that area.

NSSE benchmark scores are designed to facilitate comparison among similar institutions across the United States. NSSE recommends caution when comparing different types of institutions within a state.

Undergraduate Student Experience

The Council uses NSSE's benchmarks of effective educational practice to gauge the quality of undergraduate student experience at the state's public universities. In 2003, members of the Kentucky consortium performed particularly well in the “enriching educational experiences” and “student interactions



with faculty members” benchmarks. Kentucky’s public universities showed less strength in the “active and collaborative learning” and “supportive campus environment” benchmarks.

Among both first-year students and seniors, seven of Kentucky’s public universities scored above predicted levels for the enriching educational experiences benchmark, the consortium’s strongest performance category in 2003. Students’ reported rates of participation in internships, foreign language study, and use of technology to complete assignments are among the survey items included in this benchmark. In 2001, seven institutions scored above predicted levels for this benchmark among first-year students; five institutions scored above predicted for seniors.

In 2001, the Kentucky consortium had more scores above predicted levels in student/faculty interactions than in any other benchmark; the consortium’s strong performance in this category continued in 2003. In both 2001 and 2003, seven Kentucky institutions performed above predicted levels for student/faculty interactions with first-year students; five institutions outperformed their peers with senior students. Indicators included in the student/faculty interactions category include the frequency with which students report having discussions with faculty members outside of class or work with faculty on projects unrelated to coursework.

NSSE’s level of academic challenge benchmark measures the amount of time students spend preparing for class, the extent to which coursework emphasizes application of theories or concepts (rather than memorizing material), and whether students indicate they must work hard to meet instructors’ expectations. The Kentucky consortium’s weakest performance in 2001 was in this category; performance in the academic challenge benchmark improved in 2003. In 2001, four universities scored above predicted levels among first-year students; only two universities scored above predicted levels among seniors. In 2003, the number of universities scoring above predicted levels rose to five among first-year students and four among senior students.

The number of Kentucky institutions scoring above predicted for the active and collaborative learning benchmark decreased for first-year students and increased for seniors. Among first-year students, the number of institutions scoring above predicted declined from five in 2001 to three in 2003. Among seniors, the number of institutions scoring above predicted rose from four institutions in 2001 to five in 2003. Responses to questions about the number of times students contribute to class discussion, make presentations, or tutor fellow students are included in the active and collaborative learning benchmark.

In both 2001 and 2003, Kentucky’s public universities showed the least strength in “supportive campus environment.” Survey items in this category include questions about academic and non-academic support and students’ perceptions of the quality of their relationships with faculty and with other students. Only three institutions outperformed their peers in this area for first-year and for senior students in 2003. Three institutions scored above predicted among first-

year students in supportive campus environment in 2001; two institutions scored above predicted among seniors.

The Council's goal for its undergraduate student experience indicator is for all universities to score above predicted levels for each benchmark. Kentucky did not achieve this goal in 2003, but showed improvement since 2001. In 2001, Kentucky's public universities scored above predicted on 43 of 80 NSSE benchmark scores. In 2003, there were 49 scores above predicted levels.

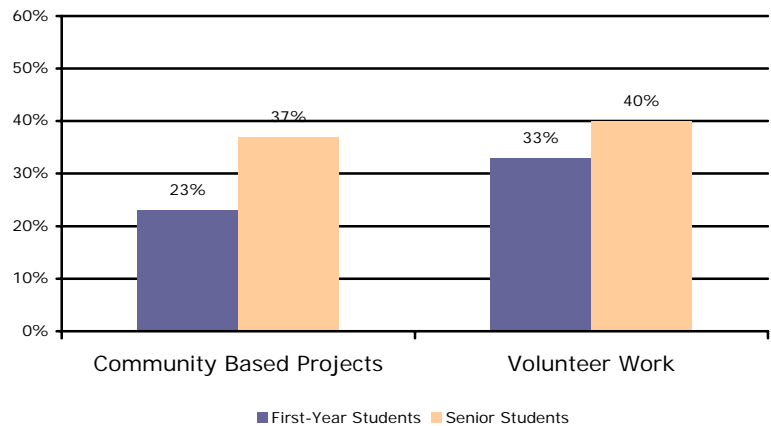
Civic Engagement

Council staff and institutional representatives selected four items from the NSSE survey to measure undergraduate students' civic engagement:

- Participation in a community-based project as part of a regular course
- Hours per week spent doing volunteer work
- Voting in local, state, or national elections
- Contributing to the welfare of the community

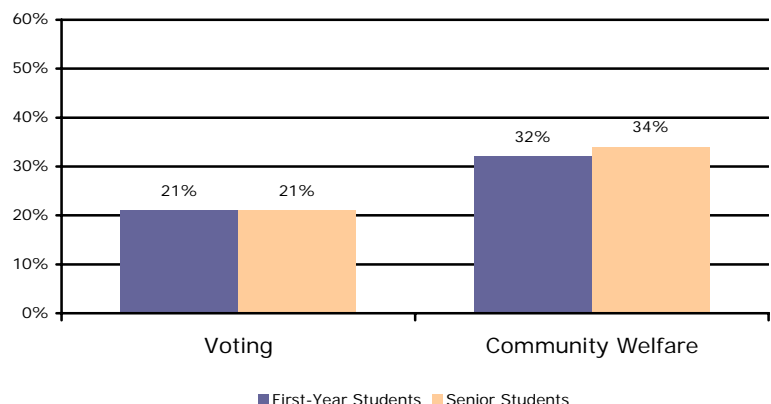
Statewide, 23 percent of first year students and 37 percent of seniors reported participating in a community-based project as part of a regular course (see attachment 2 for results by institution). Undergraduates were slightly more likely to report participation in general volunteer work: 33 percent of first-year students and 40 percent of seniors indicated they spent some time each week volunteering for an educational, charitable, or religious cause.

Percentage of Students Volunteering



NSSE participants were asked how their experience in college contributed to their personal development in a number of areas, including voting and contributing to the welfare of their community. These survey questions are not intended to measure behavior – how many students actually vote, for instance – but how college has shaped their attitudes toward certain behaviors.

Percentage of Students Reporting College Contributed Significantly to Development



Approximately 21 percent of both first-year and senior students in the Kentucky consortium reported that their experience had contributed “very much” or “quite a bit” to their ideas about voting. Both first-year (32 percent) and senior students (34 percent) were more likely to report that their university experience had made a significant contribution toward their developing attitudes about community welfare.

The Council’s goal for the civic engagement indicator is for the percentage of positive responses to increase for each question. A comparison of Kentucky consortium results from 2001 and 2003 shows a decline in undergraduate civic engagement. The percentage of first-year students reporting they took part in a community-based project as part of a regular course increased by one percentage point between 2001 and 2003; the number of seniors reporting they participated in a community based project remained unchanged. The percentage of students reporting participation in general volunteer work dropped by 12 percentage points for first-year students and by nine percentage points for seniors. Fewer first-year and senior students reported that their college experience contributed to the development of their attitudes toward voting in 2003 (21 percent) than in 2001 (27 percent). The percentage of first-year students who reported that college contributed to their attitudes about community welfare increased between 2001 and 2003 (25 percent vs. 32 percent), while the percentage of seniors decreased (37 percent vs. 34 percent).

Additional Findings

Results from the 2001 NSSE and the Council’s 2001 undergraduate alumni survey alerted the Council to students’ low satisfaction with academic and career advising. The Council’s February 2003 student advising conference was organized in part as a response to those survey results. Analysis of the 2003 NSSE results suggests progress has been made in improving advising. The rating first-year students assigned to the quality of academic advising improved at seven of Kentucky’s eight public universities between 2001 and 2003. Ratings assigned by senior students improved at four institutions.

NSSE’s annual report, *Converting Data into Action*, identifies key findings from the 2003 administration. Results from Kentucky reflect many positive national trends:

- Two-fifths (41 percent) of all students earn mostly A grades, and only three percent have C or lower average grades. Kentucky students reported slightly lower grades: 39 percent earn mostly A grades, five percent earn C grades.
- About four-fifths of seniors in the nation (79 percent) and Kentucky (77 percent) report their classes emphasized applying theories or concepts to practical problems.
- Two-fifths (41 percent) of seniors nationally enroll in foreign language courses; one in five (18 percent) study abroad. Kentucky students are less

likely to participate in these activities: 37 percent studied a foreign language, and 11 percent studied abroad.

Kentucky also followed the national trend in more disappointing findings:

- More than two-fifths of first-year students in the nation (45 percent) and Kentucky (48 percent) “never” discuss ideas from their classes with a faculty member outside the classroom.
- Fewer than half of seniors nationally (49.8 percent) and in Kentucky (45.1 percent) frequently have serious conversations with students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.
- Approximately one-third of all seniors nationally and in Kentucky (32 percent) only “occasionally” get prompt feedback from faculty members.

In the foreword to its annual report, “Raising the Bar,” NSSE considers the issue of appropriate performance standards for participating institutions. The NSSE researchers hypothesize that striving to reach NSSE’s national average, to keep pace with “the rest of the pack,” may set a performance standard that is too low. Instead, they suggest institutions might strive to achieve the performance levels of high-achieving institutions, those in the top 5 percent. For example, 24 percent of seniors nationally reported they “very often” had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity, compared to 39 percent at the institutions in the top 5 percent. This suggested model, in which universities are encouraged to compare themselves to top performers, is similar to the model used in *Measuring Up*, the national state-by-state report card on higher education. NSSE plans to distribute further information about top-performers – including descriptions of best practices – later this year. The Council staff will continue to monitor these developing performance standards.

Affordability

NSSE allows participating consortia to customize the survey instrument by adding questions of their own design. In 2003, the Kentucky consortium added several questions related to affordability and students’ perceptions of college costs. Results from this portion of the survey will help inform the Council’s work on affordability policy. Highlights include:

- Nearly three-quarters of the Kentucky students (76 percent of first-year students and 71 percent of seniors) surveyed indicated they were concerned about their ability to pay for college.
- However, more than 40 percent of both first-year and senior students identified “graduating with a high GPA” as their “most important” educational goal. Only 8 percent of first-year students and 11 percent of seniors identified “graduating with little or no debt” as their most important goal.

- There was a noticeable shift in the sources first-year and senior students identified for funds used to defray college costs, suggesting that students bear increased personal responsibility for college costs as they progress. One in three seniors (31.6 percent) identified personal loans as their most important mechanism for paying for college; 22.7 percent indicated parents were bearing the cost of college. More first-year students identified parents as their most important source of funds (27.1 percent), followed by scholarships (16.7 percent) and loans (16.3 percent).

These survey results are in keeping with recent studies of college affordability: while there is legitimate concern in many quarters about rising college costs, Kentucky remains an affordable state.

Conclusion

Results from the 2003 NSSE indicate Kentucky students participate in a wide range of activities likely to foster student learning and development. Compared to 2001, members of the Kentucky consortium were more likely to outperform their peer institutions. More effort will be required, however, to reach the Council's undergraduate experience goal – all institutions performing above predicted for all benchmark scores – or to approach the performance standards established by NSSE's "top 5 percent" institutions. Results for the Council's undergraduate civic engagement indicator suggest concerted effort is necessary in that area.

The Council staff and the institutions are addressing areas of concern identified by the 2003 NSSE results. Already, to improve civic engagement scores, the Council staff and institutional presidents have secured a seed grant to make Kentucky a Campus Compact state. Campus Compact is a national organization that works with states to provide support for increased student involvement in service learning and other civic engagement activities. George Kuh, NSSE's project director, will address the Council's 2004 Faculty Development Conference. Over the next several months, the Council staff will work to develop additional improvement strategies.

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